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A New Kind of Body Project: Blogging and the American Teen Girl

Acknowledgments

To girl bloggers everywhere

Joan Jacobs Brumberg, in her 1997 work *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, discussed American teen girls' slow transition throughout the 20th century away from "good works" toward "good looks" (Brumberg, 1997, p. xx). They did this through what Brumberg called a body project: a personal quest to become the ideal teenage girl. Using critical analysis of girls' diaries a primary source, she found that "girls today make the body into an all-consuming project in ways that young women of the past did not" (Brumberg, 1997, p. xvii). Her research ended with the 20th century. At the close of the century, the Internet was still a mewling infant, hardly a factor in America's daily life. Since then, the World Wide Web has grown rapidly, so much so that this growth has begun to slow due to saturation especially in first world countries (Malik, 2010; Meeker, 2014). In the internet American girls have found a new way to conduct a body project—the blog.

The term "blog" is a shortened form of Weblog (Hsu & Lin, 2007). The Merriam-Webster Dictionary places the first usage of the term in 1997—the year, remarkably enough, when Brumberg's work was published. A blog is a web site where authors write about "personal opinions, activities, and experiences" (Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, "Blog," n. d.). The Pew Research Center found that between 2006 and 2010, blogs from young adults and teens between the ages of 12 to 17 has actually decreased as these users move into adulthood. However, 93% of all members of this age group still go online regularly often to microblog or use social media (Lenhart *et al*, 2010, p. 2-4). Social networking sites appeared the same year as blogging and are online spaces that "help strangers connect" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 210). The blog, then, is a form of online journaling which is very relevant to the age group being studied here.

Physical body projects, spelled out in ink and paper, have the same basic goals as online diaries. While the blogosphere continues the trend of physical rather than mental improvement, the practice of blogging allows girls to carry on their own body projects in ways that are more interactive, peer-intrusive, and extensive. Girls of this day and age, like the ones of the late 20th century, place a great deal of emphasis on thinness, clothing, and relationships. Now, the body project takes on a new element—the affirmation of the public eye. This affects the modern body project in a variety of ways, some of which hearken back to earlier periods of American societal values. It may even be said that the online body project is in part a return to the enthusiastic early 20th century goal of inner improvement even while continuing the modern quest for outer polishing. Analyzing qualitative research with consideration to historical context and examining a sample of blogs illuminates the current mode of conducting a body project in the digital age.

Method

This study intends to function as a metonymy by taking the words of a selected few in order to try to understand the attitudes of the whole. Brumberg (1997) wrote that "because diaries reveal so much about the heart of being a girl, I use them whenever possible to provide entry into the hidden history of female adolescents' experience" (p. xxvii). In a similar way, blogs can serve as windows into the thoughts and feelings of adolescent teen girls as the internet is such a readily accessible source of data. Since blogs could be game-changers in the world of teen body image, they represent a unique portrait of the modern teen body project and will be used as primary sources in this study.

I used a modified snowball technique to choose a data set of 40 girl blogs, first Googling keywords such as "teen girl blogs" and "blogs written by teens." This resulted in a small list

because very few girls named their blogs something so obvious preferring more descriptive and unique names. This fact constitutes a potential bias. After perusing those first ones, however, I was able to find more by scanning the list of blogs followed by that girl. I saved the url and ascertain if these, too, were written by teen girls. In turn, the new bloggers would provide more options to explore. In this way, a chain of links to more blogs materialized that provided the data for my research. I made little effort to control the type of blogs when gathering data but used snowball sampling freely to gain as representative a piece of the blogosphere as I could. I used opportunity sampling by not setting a limit on the quantity of blogs when I began. Due to time constraints I capped the sample at 40 urls.

In choosing blogs, I included only blogs written by girls in the United States between the ages of 12 and 20—the ones, by definition, written by “American teenage girls.” As per university and IRB guidelines, none of the girls were ever contacted or informed that their publications were being used. I simply examined them as part of the public domain. Only blogs that are maintained by one teen writer each were included. While collaborative blogs are very much a common practice, the solo online diary fits the parameters of this work better. I examined a total of 40 blogs in the month of April, 2014, reading for 7 hours each week and taking notes on what I saw.

During analysis, I made note of repeated ideas and recorded my observations as I read. After sampling and a phenomenological approach to grounded theory, I then coded the content of each blog for repeated ideas. Coding results were used in two ways: firstly as a way to determine genres for the blogs according to their subject matter, and secondly to analyze the content in each genre for comparison to each other and to Brumberg’s diaries. The resulting list revealed four genres: diary, pro-ana, style, and whole-self. This paper will show how blogging is a marriage of two ideas taken from Brumberg’s (1997) work: outer maintenance of body and inner development of character.

Why Blog?

The first and foremost question this paper seeks to answer is: Why do teen girls blog? The answer to this may seem obvious on first inspection. Girls blog to share their feelings; girls blog to have a creative outlet. The full answer is more complicated. One girl asked, “Why in the world am I doing this? Why am I being a weirdo that let’s [sic] people see my innermost thoughts on the internet? Why?” She quickly answered her own question: “It’s a teenage girl’s diary but online” (deeplyconfusinghighlyamusing). This is the most clear and obvious reason for blogging. It is not the only one, however. Nardi *et al* (2004) in a qualitative study of 23 bloggers in California discovered a few main reasons why people blog: to document their lives, as commentary on current issues, for catharsis, as a community forum, and as a “muse” with which to share their feelings (44). This section will discuss both the benefits and harmful effects of blogging, as well as how blogging has two aspects: interpersonal and intrapersonal.

To Blog...

Apart from the obvious reasons, there are many less discernable benefits and harmful effects of blogging, most of which have to do with the community aspect of the blogosphere. The internet functions as a great equalizer, which Jenkins (2006) mentioned in regards to the educational aspect of online interaction. Due to this democratizing effect of the web, anyone

anywhere may become a writer by beginning online (Jenkins, 2006). A few girls stated this openly by mentioning that they started their blog partially or completely so they could get better at writing (earthtocase, writingismykryptonite, aninfinitydynamic).

A common practice for the girls was writing fiction on their blog, some of which took the form of serials or poetry as well as the more typical short story. Jenkins (2006) also discussed how writing fiction with some truths helps fan-fiction writers online work through real-life issues, noting that “children use stories to escape from or reaffirm aspects of their real lives” (Jenkins, p. 182). As teen girls write fiction about topics near and dear to their hearts, they are better able to accept and understand their own circumstances. One girl wrote, “I had a really inspiring weekend, and I couldn’t help but write about it. I feel as though I don’t blog as much as I should, but when I do, I have such purpose and I really feel that to be important” (thesecretlifeofanactualteenager, April 14, 2014). As the girls write their own stories and some fictional ones, they manage difficulties in their daily lives in a way that is more positive.

While many girls seek a unique reason to blog, the vast majority are there for the same purpose: self-discovery through peer support, and overall, pursuit of their own personal body projects. Girls take pride in their blogs and in sharing them with others. They feel accomplished when they reach a significant number of posts and make New Year’s resolutions about blogging more (bigcitydreamer, pinkstoryofme). Bloggers help each other through tough times—through parent divorces, deaths of close family and friends, breakups, and illness. In short, every teenage heartache that girls aid each other with in person transfers to the virtual world.

...Or Not to Blog

While the benefits seem self-evident, there are a few risks as well. Although most topics transfer neatly to the blogosphere, the procedure is occasionally messy. Since the overall consensus in the sample seems to be that the internet is a relatively safe place, one where anything may be shared with little fear of retribution, there can be turbulence when too much information is shared. This turbulence comes in the form of negative feedback in the comments or otherwise. One girl wrote that she was grateful for her kind followers, since she had been reading articles about blogs whose commenters were not so kind (abeautifulheart07). Another girl dealt with negative comments through this stern reprimand:

Dear Anons who like to send me crappy comments,
I really don't care what anyone thinks of me because everyone has a right to their own opinion. If you really hated me that much then, then say it to my face, not my blog, because thats [sic] pathetic. Everyone gets hate and no one appreciates it so lay off or come talk to me in person :)

xoxo (theuglygeekling, May 11, 2012)

This thinly-veiled sarcasm shows suppressed hurt at what should be a positive, collaborative experience that has sadly gone wrong.

Like theuglygeekling, others seemed united in their need to make the blogosphere a safe place for writing. Knockedaskew frequently wrote posts but failed to publish them, concerned with what her readers would think. She then resolved that “from now on, I’m posting *everything* that I write on here. I’m not holding back anymore because I really want to know if other people have the same views as me” (knockedaskew, August 18, 2011, emphasis in original). Through her insistence on openness, she is fostering a universally free space to write whatever she thinks and feels in spite of criticism. Privacy is still an issue when it comes to people other than the girls

themselves, however, as few girls were careful to use nicknames when referring to their friends or family members.

A few deal with the privacy issue by simply writing under an alias or pseudonym. Secretsofateenager wrote that “I’m using a pen name and am anonymous but everything I write on here is and will be the truth and not made up. I feel that if I keep my real identity unknown then I can honestly tell my secrets and not have to worry about ruining my reputation” (thesecretsofateenager, February 2, 2013). My research contained only a few bloggers who used a pen name however. Most shared their full identities with their readers. The internet, it seems, is a separate place from that of the face-to-face world. This is one of its biggest appeals, but also one of the greatest risks that girl bloggers face. Tuhsang expressed this fear when she said, “I want to say more but I’m scared someone I know is reading this” (February 21, 2014). The blogosphere, though it is an inherently public arena, is designed paradoxically to be mostly anonymous. Its anonymity makes it safe and yet dangerous. The reason for this risk is found in the inherently public nature of a blog—that is, blogging takes an intrapersonal experience and makes it interpersonal.

Blogging as Interpersonal

Once a girl decides to hazard the potential risks and write a blog, she enters into a relational context that is vast, well-populated, and complex. Dialectics theory determines that every relationship will have varied levels of openness or closedness in regards to sharing information (Gudykunst & Mody, 2002; Floyd, 2009; Montgomery & Baxter, 1998). In this case, the internet forms the other half of an interesting and different relationship than American teen girls were wont to have in previous eras. Girls now are saddled with the task of navigating how much is appropriate to tell their readers and how much they must keep to themselves. Nardi *et al* (2004) also found that bloggers were highly aware of their audience, “calibrating” their writing to the appropriate level of openness (42-43). Myrelevancy put it thusly, “I think that I have been acquainted with the internet long enough to tell it all about myself. I mean, we’re pretty tight now” (myrelevancy, May 19 2013). How did she and the internet get this “tight”? In this case, it happens in a similar fashion as with a face-to-face relationship: through self-disclosure.

The girls in the 40-blog sample followed these models frequently in their writing. Nearly every blogger in the sample was highly aware of her audience, addressing them as “you guys” and scrupulously greeting them with “hello” and “goodbye” in many cases. Bloggers feel a certain obligation to their readers and feel guilty when they have not posted recently (big city dreamer, pinkstoryofme, earthtocase). They ask for feedback on what they should post (thetrue-thereal). They dangle new posts about significant events over their readers’ heads like a wrapped candy from a beloved adult’s pocket (aziaanderson, sometimesijustdontgetmyself, myrelevancy, apassionatafortheking). The girls love and cherish their readers like their own dear relatives because of the bond they have gained through telling their innermost thoughts and secrets with them.

In return, the comments made by readers are usually very encouraging and familiar, often offering advice, sympathy, and praise. Blog readers view comments in blogs as important as the blog content itself (Moor & Efimova, 2004, as cited in Hu *et al*, 2007). In the sample, many commenters were other teen girl bloggers, but others seemed to be adults commenting familiarly and complimenting the young writers. Chittenden (2010) emphasized the importance of followers, who are different from social media “friends,” as well as the importance of having

comments on your blog for boosting self-esteem (515-516). The girls in turn are gushingly grateful for feedback from their readers as was littlejamieg who wrote that she was:

apprehensive in starting a blog this past summer...But I have to say, I have been shocked. In only 5 months, I have more followers and page views than I ever thought was possible...What I am most proud about is that you guys are engaged - *you are sending me opinions, suggestions, and ideas* - and I could not thank you enough for that (littlejamieg.tumblr.com, December 31 2013, emphasis in original).

These commenters and followers turn the private diary into a public blog, and are a key element in forming the modern body project into what it is today.

Blogs as Intrapersonal

On top of the collaborative and peer-oriented nature of blogs, they seem to ultimately serve as an unrestricted place for freedom of expression. One girl greeted her audience with the unmistakable banner, “Welcome to the life of a[n] Alaskan teenage girl... Enjoy the show as she figures life (and herself) out” (sometimesijustdontgetmyself, About). Nearly every girl in the sample expressed, implicitly or explicitly, the feeling for the need to say how they truly felt away from parental and peer-based pressure. Alongside their own personal body projects, the blog also allows them to conduct a “body project” for their online presence—that is, their blog is something to be tended and nurtured. They can gain more followers and increase their online social capital. As adolescents form their own identity, they look at others as models to emulate (Josselson, 1994, as cited in Chittenden, 2010, p. 96). Blogs are an ideal place for this to happen (Huffaker, 2005, as cited in Blinka & Smahel, 2009). Whether this is a positive influence remains to be seen, but it is clear that girls are influenced by peers on the Internet which is one more arena in which they will wrestle with finding their own place in the world. The blog’s body project could easily be considered interpersonal because it cannot be conducted without the help of others. However, it is better described as intrapersonal because it is a personal quest to build one’s reputation and importance online.

No matter how a girl uses her blog for development, neither the risks nor the benefits of blogging can be denied. Though there are a myriad of ways to classify the way girls blog. The sample of 40 blogs revealed four main categories: diary, pro-ana, style, and what I have termed the “whole-self” blog. The diary type fit most closely within Brumberg’s framework and spoke closely to the inner body project of the early 1900s. The pro-ana blogs and style blogs reaffirmed Brumberg’s assertion that over time girls have turned from a quest for good thoughts to good looks. Finally, whole-self blogs combine the tension between inner and outer in a harmonious recapitulation of the whole.

Discussion and Analysis

The teenage girl blog is an online text full of possibilities. While most of us have never been an American teen girl, some of us have been American, or a girl, or a teen. It could be even argued that each and every human being is constantly wrapped in a body project of their own. Drawing concrete conclusions about American culture as a whole is not possible from such a small sample, but several major inferences can be made most of which deal with how blogging affects the teen girl’s health and happiness in a changing world. Blogs arguably eclipse the traditional diary in an updated, more effective way to develop the teen girl and her psyche. In

most cases, I allow the words of the teen girls themselves to take center stage in speaking to what is important and relevant to American teen girls today.

Bloggers have clear feelings about how blogging can effectively solve and prevent problems for teen girls. I defer to the blogger at *sorrynotsos* who expresses the blogging body project in these terms:

Lets [sic] be real about this whole blog thing...My existence here on earth could very well be nothing to [sic] important...But we all are invisible to someone if you think about it, sometimes the ones you wished noticed you as you passed in the hallway or some of the ones who tried to erase every last, living, breathing, moment in your existence here. Its [sic] the side you take on how you embrace being invisible. (February 17, 2014)

This idea of being "invisible" according to her seems to be a common problem for teen girls. Blogging allows them an unregulated, uncensored outlet for whatever they wish to say and allows them to be very much visible to other teens.

Preventing invisibility could also be a preemptive measure for many difficulties in life. The blogger at *zebraunicornasiss* may have said it best when she apologized, "Sorry for those who are sick of my 'learn a lesson' posts, but this has been bugging me all day, and I need to get it down...where somebody will see this, and hopefully prevent it from happening to somebody else" (Feb 14, 2012). Studying girls' blogs provides insight into how teen girls enact their personal body projects today. As *zebraunicornasiss* implies, reading and understanding teen girl blogs gives outside readers an inside view into their thoughts and feelings. No matter who reads them, ultimately as another girl elegantly expressed it, "this space is an extension of myself" (*reflectionsofelizabeth*, About). Through understanding a blog, we may in part understand the self.

Though some blogs certainly demonstrate the risks of blogging (such as pro-ana blogs or privacy issues with sharing one's self online), over all the practice is a positive one. As *earthtocase* wrote, "the concept of blogging deserves an award or at least a round of applause" (*earthtocase*, January 2, 2014). She wrote this in reference to the way her blog had improved her writing skills which is certainly an important aspect of blogging. Yet it goes much deeper than that. Blogging serves a number of essential functions through collaboration and self-reflection with feedback, which were not available before the internet was invented.

Perhaps the blogger who best encapsulated both the interpersonal and intrapersonal experience of the blog was *raucous-smiling* who eloquently wrote:

The Internet builds people up, makes them their own little celebrity. This blog in particular allows me to become self-indulgent, selfish. So is this goodbye? I'll probably crawl back here when things get too rough and I need a little ego boost. But like two good friends, there comes a time when we must part in order to reunite with renewed appreciation of one another. I'm looking at two or three months['] vacation from here, a reappearance around the first week of June. During that time, I'll see the world, open my mind to new things, make myself a better person. And when I return, we'll do a slow-mo[tion] run-and-hug scene, and you'll say with teary eyes, 'My, my, you've grown!' (*raucous-smiling*, March 24, 2014)

Contrary to her intentions, she was unable to leave. She returned almost immediately to a blogosphere that did, indeed, welcome her with open arms (*raucous-smiling*, March 25, 2014). Whenever life as a teenage girl gets tough, the internet will be there as a therapeutic, interactive body project.

The implications for this century and beyond are difficult to predict especially as the blog recedes and social media platforms advance. Even more illuminating would be a study about micro-blogging and social media in terms of Brumberg's (1997) work if a sufficient measure for the qualitative data could be found. In the meantime, however, the new body project of these 40 teen girls may serve as a way to understand the female teen psyche a little better.

In the early 1900s, American girls were taught to deemphasize outer beauty in favor of the inner. Due to changes in societal values over time, girls became less focused on inner beauty in favor of the outer. Brumberg (1997) deplored the decline of organizations for teen girls in America as well as their turning away from the support of their mothers and older women in their communities, saying that these institutions functioned as a safety net in times of strife. She seemed disappointed in the different ways girls were evolving from their belief in their inner selves and focusing only on their outer selves. While it is impossible to turn back the clock, it is necessary to find a balance between the old and the new in advocating teen girls in America today.

Perhaps one way that girls are adapting in this brave new world without safety nets is through collaboration with other girls online. My sample showed almost a graded scale from the superficial to the interior, proving that girls are still thinking about all aspects of their lives. Girls may have been led to write about only the most positive aspects of themselves online, but this is of small significance if portraying their best selves leads to the inspiration and aid of others.

Brumberg (1997) in her conclusion called for girl advocacy, positing that "it is time for us to talk—squarely and fairly—about the ways in which American girlhood has changed and what girls must have to ensure a safe and creative future" (214). Perhaps teen girl blogs are making the same plea. While it may be time for the nebulous group called "us" to merely talk, girls are using action instead of words. This action is working to create the "safe and creative future" for themselves, and one way they are doing this is through their blogs.

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